

The meeting in Sochi: the illusion of an end to the Syria conflict

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On 22 November the presidents of Russia, Turkey and Iran, Vladimir Putin, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Hasan Rouhani, met in Sochi. The summit concerned the situation in Syria after the liquidation of Islamic State (IS), and was preceded by trilateral consultations between the country's foreign ministers and chiefs of staff. The three parties agreed on further measures to resolve the conflict on the basis of the Astana process, including the four previously created de-escalation zones in the west of the country. The aim in Syria is to hold parliamentary elections and adopt a new constitution which would enable a peaceful coexistence for the different ethnic and religious groups living in Syria. The first step is supposed to be the Syrian National Dialogue Congress, scheduled for the beginning of December, in which the parties to the conflict are to participate. However, it is already known that not all the most important groups will be represented at the Congress, including a significant part of the Sunni opposition, and the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD), which is supported by the United States, and is linked to the terrorist Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) which operates in Turkey. Two days before the Russian-Turkish-Iranian meeting, President Putin met the President of Syria Bashar al-Assad in Sochi, and announced that in connection with the termination of the anti-terrorist operation, Russian troops will be withdrawn from Syria in the near future.

Commentary

- The Sochi summit was convened at the initiative of Russia, and its postulates are intended to serve Russia's domestic and foreign policy. Moscow's aim is primarily to create the impression that the military phase of the Syrian conflict has essentially come to an end. This is to demonstrate the military victory of Russia and the forces it has supported (those of Assad's regime) over the terrorists, and their political victory over the United States and, by extension, the failure of US policy of replacing undemocratic regimes. At the same time Russia wants to show that it holds the political initiative in the process of resolving the Syrian conflict, while Washington's role in it is quite marginal. The aim of the process is to establish the recognition of the *de facto* permanence of Assad's regime, with a purely symbolic reconstruction in which a part of the moderate opposition (of which the part supported by Russia is a façade) will participate.

- The declared withdrawal of Russian troops from Syria will in fact be merely superficial. This is because Moscow will leave behind its military bases (whose existence was formalised thanks to an agreement with the Assad regime for the long-term deployment of Russian forces in the country), namely its navy base at the port of Tartus and its airbases at Khmeymim. These actions are mainly intended to serve Russia's domestic agenda. They are intended to show the Russian public – which admittedly mostly supported, while at the same time did not really understand, the need for Russia's military involvement in Syria – that the intervention has ended in success, and that the Russian forces' personnel losses, which have recently begun to rise, can be minimised or even eliminated. All of this is intended to increase the legitimacy and popular support for Vladimir Putin and weaken criticism of him before the formal announcement of his candidacy in the presidential elections in Russia in March 2018, which is expected in the coming weeks.
- However, the fall of IS in Syria (including the conquest of its last holdouts by Kurdish forces backed by the United States), and the agreement between the presidents of Iran, Russia and Turkey in Sochi, do not mean the end of the war in Syria. IS was only one of the four main sides of the conflict in the country. The Assad regime still does not control parts of the areas occupied by the Sunni opposition and the Kurdish forces. Failure to incorporate these forces in the political process would make it impossible to resolve the conflict by means of political instruments alone. In addition, there are several overlaps between the contrary interests of the external actors involved in the conflict, primarily Russia and the United States.
- Despite its significant weakness and fragmentation, the Sunni opposition, which is still hostile towards the Assad regime, the Kurdish forces and IS, is still an actor with the ability to influence the situation in the country. It controls a number of areas in the western part of the country, and enjoys the support of the neighbouring countries: Turkey in Idlib and the Turkish security zone in the north of the country; and Israel and Jordan in the south of Syria, in the provinces of Dara, Kuneitra and Suwaida. Some of the Sunni forces have been included in the political process backed by Iran, Russia and Turkey; however, a number of important groups, for example Jabhat al-Fatah al-Sham (formerly Jabhat an-Nusra) have not. In addition, the Syrian Sunni opposition (both at the meeting of the opposition forces in Riyadh on 23 November, and before the beginning of the next round of talks in Geneva on 28 November) has insisted upon the departure of Assad as a precondition for negotiations of a peace agreement, something which Damascus is firmly opposed to.
- Another obstacle to reaching a durable agreement remains the issue of the Kurdish PYD, which now controls about a quarter of the territory of Syria. This party has not been involved in the peace process due to the opposition of Turkey, which is motivated by the close ties between the PYD and the PKK. The question of the PYD also remains problematic for Russia and Iran: this group is the United States' main client in Syria, and enjoys considerable American support; US forces are stationed in the areas which it holds. In addition, the PYD has established its own, independent, authoritatively managed political entity: the Democratic Federal System of Northern Syria, which nominally draws upon post-state, extreme left-wing ideas of democratic confederalism. Despite its formal

rejection of separatism, the group presents a real obstacle to the restoration of Damascus's control in that area. In the past, Assad and the PYD had maintained an informal ceasefire, but over the last few months there have been armed clashes between the forces controlled by Damascus and the PYD, especially during the operation to retake Deir ez-Zor.